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Humor, Race, and Rhetoric: "A Liberating Sabotage of the Past's Hold on the Present"

Humor that addresses race can easily backfire. This article engages in an analysis of The Boondocks, *an adult cartoon, to investigate how humor about race and racism can function not only to generate laughter through satiric rejection of long-held racist stereotypes in the American context but also to encourage new perspectives. The analysis makes use of rhetorical concepts drawn from theorist Kenneth Burke to analyze the rhetorical and comedic functioning of the dialogue, the use of music, and the visual features of the show.*

Humor that addresses race can easily backfire.[1] One person's hilarity is another person's insult. Rhetoric scholar John Meyer explains this dynamic well, describing how humor can both unite and divide. He characterizes humor as a flexible tool that "allows communicators to transcend recurring arguments or patterns because messages with humor can get people to laugh at contradictions as a way to accept their existence" (329). But he also describes it as a "double-edged sword" that can go wrong and divide people in multiple ways. In addition, the stereotypes, attitudes, and behaviors that humor critiques and challenges may be solidified in the process.[2] This double-edged nature of humor, particularly humor focused upon race and racism, is the focus of this analysis of *The Boondocks*.

During its seven-year run as a comic strip (1999–2006), Aaron McGruder's *The Boondocks* was praised for brazenly critiquing a range of American public

figures, but especially African-Americans. McGruder stated that the strip "tell[s] jokes about Black people to Black people" (qtd. in Simpkins 42). The strip challenged African-Americans' prejudices and stereotypes of themselves and others. In an interview with NPR's Madeline Brand in 2003, McGruder said: "I saw what fun [people] were having with White celebrities . . . no one [was] doing that for our celebrities. Our celebrities deserved to be lampooned as much as everybody else's." As such, McGruder took up his artist brush and writer's pen to critique the materialism, misogyny, and homophobia of hip-hop icons such as Puff Daddy, 50 Cent, and R. Kelly.

McGruder's critiques extend beyond the realm of hip-hop to include a range of celebrities and issues such as white supremacy, media censorship, US foreign and domestic policy, uncritical patriotism, and other aspects of race relations between whites and blacks. John-Hall states: "Aaron McGruder's biting comic strip provides a truth-to-power commentary that makes white people flinch, black folks think (and flinch), and all of us exceedingly more enlightened" (D1). At the peak of its run, *The Boondocks* comic strip was printed daily in over three hundred newspapers. In 2005 McGruder signed a contract with Cartoon Network's *Adult Swim*, a block of programming targeting college-age viewers. *The Boondocks* television show had an initial two-season run from 2006–08; these episodes are the focus of this study. After a two-year hiatus, the third season aired during 2010, and the show has been renewed for the 2011–12 season.

Though McGruder believes he is doing a service for the black community by openly and honestly criticizing it, some have reacted to *The Boondocks* with outrage. Columnist Larry Elder was offended enough to suggest "an award for the 'Dumbest, Most Vulgar, Most Offensive Things Uttered by Black Public Figures' . . . [and] . . . we could call the award the 'McGruder'" (*Capitalism Magazine*). After an episode that showed Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. using the "N" word, Reverend Al Sharpton said, "We are totally offended by the continuous use of the 'N' word in McGruder's show." He went on to call for the Cartoon Network to "apologize and also commit to pulling episodes that desecrate black historical figures" (*Cartoon Network Defends*). McGruder has defended himself by saying: "I just tell jokes, and I think a lot of people take it too seriously" (*Public Enemy #2*). Given the rhetorical force of humor, and the edgy choices the show makes, these critiques are not surprising. McGruder has an intellectually sophisticated proponent in Mark Antony Neal, who praised McGruder and his comic strip for "regularly problematiz[ing] unsophisticated readings of black culture and identity" (130).

Scholars have struggled over the double-edged nature of comedy that addresses race and racism in America. In *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery*, Glenda Carpio traces the history of how African-American

humor has confronted racial stereotypes and racism, as well as the history and legacy of slavery in the United States. Her analysis focuses on the productive possibilities of humor that uses race and racism as its subject matter. More specifically, she describes how this humor offers a means of response: "By most accounts, African-Americans have faced racism, in its various manifestations and guises, with a rich tradition of humor that, instead of diminishing the dangers and perniciousness of racism, highlights them" (4). Carpio's analysis is helpful in that it reveals how comedy works to "inhabit the images, exaggerate them, and dislocate them from their habitual contexts" and then to "set [them] in disturbing motion" (13). While there is the possibility of reaffirming the stereotypes in this process, there is also the promise and possibility of creating a perspective that while not eliminating the stereotypes or their history, does hold out hope for moving beyond them. As such, this use of humor "ultimately seek[s] to effect a liberating sabotage of the past's hold on the present" (15). This is our sense of the manner in which *The Boondocks* operates.

In this essay we show how humor about race and racism can function not only to generate laughter through satiric rejection of long-held racist stereotypes in the American context but also to encourage new perspectives, generated by the recognition of incongruity. Through the use of rhetorical concepts drawn from rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke, we seek to enlighten viewers and media analysts of the rhetorical features of this and other similar instances of humor that address matters of race in America. We begin with a brief overview of the main characters in the show. We then explain several concepts from Burke that shed light on the double-edged nature of this humor. We follow this with our analysis of the dialogue, the use of music, and the visual features of the show. In each case this reading focuses on how the frame of rejection not only generates laughter but also new perspective. What at first may appear to be the acceptance of racism is not; it is rejection. This satiric rejection generates perspective by incongruity and helps to explain why scholars and critics present contrasting views on comedy that utilizes racism as its subject matter.

The Boondocks

Huey Freeman is the preteen leading protagonist of *The Boondocks* who in attitude and behavior lives up to his namesake: Huey Newton, the cofounder of the Black Panther Party. The image of Huey Newton in American media portrayals, particularly since his murder in 1989, is a complex one.[3] Rhodes recounts the complexity of the various media portrayals of Huey Newton, including his role not only as an iconic figure for the Black Power movement and a fallen freedom fighter but also as a criminal and a drug addict. She sees in Huey Freeman of *The*

Boondocks a character that "retains many of the characteristics of the Panther mythology, down to the Afro, scowl, and doctrinaire language" (326). In *The Boondocks* Huey Freeman is an enlightened young black man who regularly opines about the current US President, white supremacy, and the state of the black community in America. He describes himself as "the founder of twenty-three different radical leftist organizations, including the Africans Fighting Racism and Oppression, or AFRO, if you will, the Black Revolutionary Organization, or BRO . . . and also the Black Revolutionary Underground Heroes . . . BRUH" (*The Real*).[4] As Huey interacts with the other characters, he reflects upon the politics of race and often emerges as the voice of reason.

Huey's younger brother Riley is a wannabe thug who champions BET, "gangsta" culture, and the "hip-hop lifestyle." Riley has significantly internalized the misogynistic, homophobic, and materialistic ideology present in some hip-hop music. He has created an obviously exaggerated false reality in which he believes he is struggling in the streets to overcome "the Man." When questioned about his music idol, Gangstalicious, he says, "I know he not a real gangsta, but that's cool. Cuz he's in entertainment; he doesn't have to be in the streets like I do. He's telling our stories for us" (*The Story of Gangstalicious*). Ironically, as much as Riley speaks of his struggle on the streets, the Freeman's live in a wealthy suburb, on Timid Deer Lane.

Robert Freeman is the cantankerous grandfather of Huey and Riley. Robert is responsible for moving the boys from the south side of Chicago to the lily-white Woodcrest suburb. Unlike his grandsons who fight the white power structure, Granddad is known to work with and manipulate it for his advantage. Granddad is always worried that his grandsons will cause distress to the greater white community and threaten their position in Woodcrest.

Uncle Ruckus is a belligerent black man who has fully adopted a white supremacist outlook and value system and hates black people. Likely the most controversial character in the show, Uncle Ruckus derives his attitudes and behaviors from his historical and cultural predecessors Uncle Tom and Uncle Remus. Ruckus not only enjoys serving whites, but he also worships their very existence: "White man just a joy to be around. They smell like lemon juice and pledge furniture cleaner" (*The Trial of R. Kelly*). Like Uncle Remus, the wise folk-teller, he passes on his "wisdom" through tall tales. Amazingly, although Uncle Ruckus is black, he believes that he is white: "Many people mistake me for being negro because they don't know that I am currently living with the heart-break of re-vitiligo . . . that's a skin condition that's the opposite of what Michael Jackson's got" (*The Uncle Ruckus Reality Show*). Perhaps the fact that this character is African-American makes it possible for him to say the outrageous and hateful things he does. For example, in *Ballin'* he says: "Lookin'

at the White girl is a foul. Speaking to the White girl is a technical foul, and touching the White girl, oh, now that's a lynchin'!" (*Ballin'*). Uncle Ruckus is and by far the most exaggerated character in *The Boondocks*, and our analysis of his character is a key to our understanding of the rhetorical functioning of the show.

The final principal character is Tom Dubois who embodies the Uncle Tom stereotype, including moral virtuousness, gentleness, innocence, and even effeminacy. Tom is the most educated character in the show and the only regular character with a "white"-collar job as District Attorney of Woodcrest, tying him to W.E.B. Du Bois and the Talented Tenth. Tom is a law-abiding, upstanding citizen in all of Woodcrest. He has assimilated to the dominant white culture of Woodcrest, married a white woman, prides himself on his Irish heritage, and speaks with an exaggerated white accent.

Rhetoric of Humor

In *Attitudes Toward History*, literary critic and rhetoric scholar Kenneth Burke delineates what he takes to be the two basic frames humans employ in making sense of the world: acceptance and rejection. According to Burke, rejection takes its cue from acceptance. That is, rejection is a "by-product" of acceptance. Rejection operates in reaction to authority and, in particular, the acceptance of authority. Rejection is similar to acceptance because it "takes its color from an attitude towards some reigning symbol of authority, stressing a shift of allegiance to symbols of authority" (21). As we shall see, *The Boondocks* deals primarily in a frame of rejection: Satire and ridicule operate as vehicles of rejection, lampooning and critiquing the "reigning symbols of authority" within black America including individuals (for example, Bill Cosby, Spike Lee, Oprah Winfrey, Bob Johnson), institutions (for example, the hip-hop music industry, BET), and various aspects of black culture (for example, soul food, historical memory of the Civil Rights Movement, and use of the "N" word).

A secondary critique is directed toward white culture. Again, the most common device employed is satire, though other comedic forms are also present. Looking more deeply, and following Burke, we can see frames of rejection enable a focus that either ignores or averts attention away from the complexity of human affairs. That is, rejection localizes and simplifies complex reality down to specific attitudes and behaviors: "the singling out of one factor above others in the charting of human relationships" (28–29). These attitudes and behaviors are presented in an exaggerated construction and, as such, an extremely humorous form. There are instances where solutions are suggested and the possibility of improvement is raised, but these are not regular features of the episodes.

According to Burke, with comedy the acceptance frame shifts the focus "from *crime* to *stupidity*" and "pictur[es] people not as *vicious* but as *mistaken*" (*Attitudes Toward History* 41). Such a perspective is particularly well suited to presentations of race and racism in the American context, freighted as it is with anger, pain, and guilt. We seek to explain several of the means by which this shift in perspective is fostered because this in part explains how comedy can be both divisive and productive.

We argue that the mechanism by which these shifts in frame generate humor is through what Burke labels perspective by incongruity. At the most basic level, the process occurs when something from one area of human experience is taken from its usual context and placed in what at first appears to be an inappropriate, new context. The realization of a connection between the old and new generates a fresh perspective, driven by the incongruity. Burke describes the process as transformative, likening it to rebirth: "Rebirth and perspective by incongruity are thus seen to be synonymous, a process of conversion, though such words as conversion and rebirth are usually reserved for only the most spectacular of such reorientations, the religious" (154). In this case the potential transformation involves the viewer's understandings of race and racism in America.

Humor holds potential for breaking down and enabling audience members to move past stereotypes, fixed perspectives, and orientations. Burke describes these perspectives or orientations as a "largely self-perpetuating system in which each part tends to corroborate the other parts" (169). He captures this situation in a simple form by noting that "all is yellow to the jaundiced eye" (215). The presentation and representation of race and racism in American popular culture, particularly in mediated popular culture, has investigated this dynamic to a significant degree. Our specific focus is on how humor functions rhetorically in this process. As Burke writes, the constraints generated by these settled and dominating perspectives create the need for revision and new perspectives: "The ultimate result is the need of a reorientation, a direct attempt to force the critical structure by shifts of perspective" (169). We turn now to an explanation of how we see humor functioning through satiric rejection and perspective by incongruity.

Dialogue

We turn first to an episode where *The Boondocks* takes up the deeply difficult matter of the "N" word and its use. The conflict begins when Riley's white grammar school teacher, Mr. Petto, uses the word to refer to Riley, and Riley is subsequently interviewed by a television news crew. Riley describes the pain he feels: "I wouldn't use that word ever. That word hurts people" (*The S-Word*). This sets in motion a satirical portrayal and rejection of the hypocritical use of

the term by both African-American and white characters in the show. Granddad and Riley see the incident as an opportunity to sue the school and earn a large settlement check. When Huey confronts Granddad and Riley about taking advantage of the situation, Granddad responds: "Be happy, your brother was called a ni**er by a White man, not just any White man, a district employee! We're rich! It's like winning the Lotto!" When Huey questions this, in part by noting how often Granddad uses the term in their home, Granddad explains that the use of the term by African-Americans is different: "See its ok between us behind closed doors. We have flipped the word into a term of endearment. That's what I call my homey. Feel me? My ni**a." This focus on inconsistency continues when Rev. Goodlove, a caricature of Al Sharpton, is interviewed about the incident on television, and further incongruity is introduced through his hypocrisy. He explains, "Now, I think it's wrong for anybody to use the word ni**er at any time." Then his cell phone rings, and it is suggested that Jesse Jackson is on the line. Rev. Goodlove says, "Excuse me. Hey, hey, hey, Jessie! What's happin' my ni**er!" (*S-Word*).

The inconsistency in the behavior and words of whites is ridiculed and rejected as well. When Rev. Goodlove presents a $500,000 settlement offer to the school principal in order to compensate Riley and his family for their pain, the principal laughs aloud and then goes into the next room to share the offer with others. As he shows a group of presumably white district officers the settlement offer, he says, "Hey, come here, look at this, this ni**er must be crazy!" Satirical rejection is also generated when Ann Coulter appears on a political television show, defending the teacher:

> I think its criminal they suspended this teacher, why, I mean, why? Because he stood up to some foul-mouthed gang member? They should be giving him a medal! O, here we go again with affirmative action, let's have a different set of rules for Blacks. The teacher, because he's White, because of the color of his skin, he's being persecuted for saying the exact same word. I think THAT is racist. Next they'll be throwing White kids in jail for reciting rap lyrics. (*S-Word*)

Her apparently high-minded position is satirized for its hypocrisy because she exhibits extremely racist behavior once the interview ends. Specifically, we see her insult her black boyfriend by saying he is not working because he is lazy, is cheating on her with a black b@#ch, and that she is tired of bailing him out of jail. Seemingly, no one can get it right when it comes to the use of this word, and the significance and meaning of it will not go away. The white teacher Mr. Petto rambles on, vowing to never use the word even as he does so multiple times, while

Ruckus offers to fight for a constitutional amendment "to protect the White man's right to use any form of the 'N' word he pleases."

The episode ends with the suggestion of rejection that sets up a new perspective on this difficult issue. The process is begun with the words of Huey: "The problem with restraining speech is who gets to set the rules? If it's only ok at a certain time and place, who gets to say what time and what place? Bill Cosby?" This appeal to what appears to be a transcendent principle that resolves this deeply troubling matter is actually just the set-up for further humor and critique. Following it, Bill Cosby states: "I don't think Black people should ever use racist words when describing other Black people. And if you do, then you're a Sambo and a Coon" (*S-Word*). This episode thus addresses a very difficult and historically significant phenomenon: the use of the "N" word in American society. The use of the term by each character, save Huey—from Riley to Mr. Petto to Ann Coulter to Granddad—is shown to have an incongruous and hypocritical side. And even the final word given by Huey followed by Bill Cosby's comment only further raises the perplexing nature of the use of the term in America. As an audience, we are encouraged to laugh but also to think about the failings of American society with the past and present of not only the "N" word itself but the deep realities it invokes.

Uncle Ruckus is routinely used to bring the most intense, exaggerated, and harsh critique to selected aspects of African-American culture. For the purposes of this essay, we have focused on two predominant attitudes Ruckus regularly displays. The first is his hatred of African-Americans and the second is his love of white people. In both cases, though the satirical rejection engendered by the episodes is strong and clear, there is also the insertion of perspective by incongruity as well. Uncle Ruckus's character shows how this comedic acceptance can, ironically, be fostered by what on the surface are incredibly and often unbelievably exaggerated statements.

Ruckus may seem like a simple man on one level, yet we find him offering authoritative interpretations on everything from school desegregation to hip-hop to economics. He explains that it was not until desegregation that test scores for American school children began to fall and violence in schools began to rise. Prior to going to school with African-American children, he tells us, "White children didn't even know what guns were, after all, 'The white man is a peace lovin' man'" (*The Uncle Ruckus Reality Show*).

This strong satirical humor is pushed to an even higher level when Ruckus learns that he is African-American from a genetic test he has taken. The viewer has known this all along, but the show takes his hatred of African-Americans to the limit with this twist. He wonders aloud what he will do with himself: "Well, I'm Black now so the first thing I did was quit all my jobs. I don't know how I'm supposed to pay the bills. Probably have to start sellin' crack or rappin' or rappin'

about sellin' crack" (*The Uncle Ruckus Reality Show*). He then shows up at the Freeman house, dejected and looking for help. He sits down at the kitchen table with Huey, verbally working through his new-found realization:

> So this is what I have to look forward to as a Black man, huh? Just sittin' around playing Play Station all day waitin' for the next Madden to come out? Maybe I should go out and put rims and all kinda goofy shit on my truck. What's the point? What's the point of livin'? There's nothing to look forward to just a life of rap music and 40 oz. What am I supposed to do now, huh? Be somebody's babydaddy? Hang out at the corner all day and night? Shootin' dice, cops chasing me all the time, my body ain't made to handle a stun gun. (*The Uncle Ruckus Reality Show*)

The exaggerated and bold nature of these words from a black character generates laughter but also raises a harsh critique of selected aspects of African-American culture. What are we to make of Ruckus's self-hate, its sources, and ongoing presence? This scene and Ruckus's words are tragic and yet clearly designed to prompt laughter; but what is the significance of laughter in this instance?

Ruckus's hatred of African-Americans is matched by his love for whites. We learn that he has several "small shrines" in his home dedicated to "certain special white people who are important in my life." These include one to John Wayne, one to George H.W. Bush, and "one to the greatest soul singer of all, Barry Manilow!" This satirical critique is further drawn out in an episode where he dreams of entering "white" heaven. He is met at the Pearly Gates by Ronald Reagan, riding a horse. Reagan explains: "White heaven is for good, decent, God-fearing Christians who just happen to, well, hate everyone and everything relating to black people. That means no Muhammad Ali, no hip-hop music, and no f***ing Jesse Jackson." Reagan explains his hatred of blacks: "Personally, I hate Black people Ruckus, that's why I did everything I could to make their lives miserable. Crack? Me. AIDS? Me. Reaganomics? Come on, I'm in the name" (*Passion of Reverend Ruckus*). Ruckus's reaction is seen in his joyous facial expression upon hearing this, which is a look of pure joy at the thought of entering white heaven.

In this same episode, Ruckus becomes an evangelist, starting out on the bed of a truck in the Freeman's neighborhood in Woodcrest but eventually speaking to a huge rally with several thousand people.

> How do I make it to White heaven? Well, start by asking yourself how is my relationship with the White man? Do you celebrate the White man's goodness every day? Do you stop and thank the White man for

> the food you eat and the clothes you wear? Well, if you don't, you're going to hell. Now, I want everybody who isn't White to turn to a White person and say thank you. (*Passion of Reverend Ruckus*)

The incongruity of an African-American man so glorifying white Americans is incomprehensible if not taken humorously. Yet, a fresh perspective on white supremacy is generated by this incongruity. Both African-American and white American viewers can laugh at the obvious privileging of white Americans and the subtle ways in which American society asks nonmajority members to privilege majority members in social, political, and religious life. Yet this laughter is a sign of the rejection of it.

Ruckus's character thus pushes to the limit the satirical rejection of racial stereotypes in *The Boondocks*, seemingly leaving no stone unturned from the impact of school desegregation, to the black unemployment rate, to AIDS, to crack, and black self-hate. Likewise, it generates rejection through a no-holds-barred parody of white self-love, the whitening of Christianity, and the conservative economic ideology. Each element is raised and then expanded and exaggerated nearly beyond recognition with clear humorous intent. Yet, when the waves of laughter recede, we are left to consider and contemplate the incongruities and their meaning and significance. And we are offered the opportunity to see these matters from a new perspective, one shaped by the recognition that our laughter has confirmed—a comedic form of coping. Rejection has generated a new perspective.

Music

The music included in *The Boondocks* plays a significant role in facilitating rejection and an alternative perspective as it cues the audience to reject the most racist and ridiculous characters in the show even as it encourages laughter at the racist views they express. In general, music operates in tandem with the rejection frame. For example, as we have noted, Uncle Ruckus has an automatic hatred of African-Americans and routinely refers to African-Americans as ni**ers. While he holds down thirty-two jobs, he marvels that "most ni**ers say they can't find one" (*The Uncle Ruckus Reality Show*). Ruckus's words are a clear satirical rejection. Yet, while this satire pulls the audience toward rejection, the music that accompanies Ruckus's comments pulls the audience toward reflection and a new perspective. When Ruckus makes these hateful comments, they are accompanied by a single trombone. The notes played by the trombone are long, low, and playful; the sound is reminiscent of the Giant in *Jack and the Beanstalk*, with the low and heavy vibrato conjuring up the visual image of the Giant clumsily waddling

after Jack. As the trombone plays, we are encouraged to see Ruckus as the graceless, clumsy, and dim Giant, and, as such, his words move past rejection, through comedy, because we see him as ignorant instead of malicious.

Although his words would be hurtful and heinous on their own, the trombone cues the audience to the reversal that Ruckus is not to be taken seriously. While Ruckus's brutal words facilitate satirical rejection of black culture, the trombone facilitates our rejection of Ruckus as out of touch and fosters a different perspective with its low, simple melody. As the trombone plays behind Ruckus's words, the audience is encouraged to laugh at and reject what would otherwise be taken as hateful and racist.

Likewise, though Ruckus claims that whites are superior to blacks, the audience is cued to dismiss his belief. Just as the trombone plays when Ruckus criticizes blacks, a light whistle crescendo up the scale plays when Ruckus praises whites. The whistle is light and airy, like a sound one would expect a court jester to make with his mouth. As the audience hears the whistle, the image of a fool naturally comes to mind. The audience is cued to laugh at Ruckus and his comments. The "fool's" whistle cues the audience to see Ruckus's outsized praise of white Americans and white culture as ridiculous.

The focus on music helps us better understand how *The Boondocks* uses humor to address other matters such as issues within the hip-hop community like snitching, shining (excessive materialism), and the gratuitous use of the "N" word. For example, during *The Story of Thugnificent*, the excessive materialism present in hip-hop culture is critiqued. When gangsta rapper Thugnificent moves to Woodcrest, chaos ensues. His name, a thug who is magnificent, parodies the glorification of criminality in hip-hop culture. When Thugnificent first arrives in Woodcrest, the audience sees him and his entourage ride into the neighborhood with five luxury cars, including a Hummer, a Rolls Royce, a Range Rover, and a Mercedes convertible. As Thugnificent and his friends ride into Woodcrest, his hit single is blasting from each of the cars: "BOOTY BUTT, BOOTY BUTT, BOOTY BUTT-CHEEKS!! BOOTY BUTT, BOOTY BUTT, BOOTY BUTT-CHEEKS!" Hooks reminds us that the focus upon the black female buttocks is a common and insidious racialization of the body: "In the sexual iconography of the traditional black pornographic imagination, the protruding butt is seen as an indication of a heightened sexuality . . ." (63). This is the entire substance of the song, as this line repeats over and over and over.

In the above instance, music supports the parody to facilitate comedic rejection and reflection. To those familiar with the hip-hop genre, this song lampoons much of the current music being produced by hip-hop artists. As Thugnificent promotes his "money equals happiness" philosophy, this parody, "Booty Butt-Cheeks," is played in the background, and the audience is cued to laugh.

As Thugnificent takes out stacks of twenty-dollar bills and tosses them to people in the neighborhood, one may begin to think that money may actually be the road to happiness. But the music activates the satirical and humorous rejection frame; instead of adopting these materialistic and misogynistic attitudes, the audience is given an opportunity to laugh at them and question their origin and presence within the hip-hop community.

While music is often used as a signal for the audience to laugh, sometimes it is used to convey the gravity of a comment and also generates perspective by incongruity. For example, typically when Huey speaks, his comments are neither funny nor hurtful but thoughtful and insightful. In these cases music is used to cue the audience to reflect on his thought-provoking and, sometimes, controversial ideas. Although Huey is only ten years old, the audience is encouraged to consider what he says seriously. The classical piano music is elegant and graceful, the polar opposite of Ruckus's trombone. Just as the piano melodies are complex and sophisticated, so are Huey's words. For example, during the opening of *The Trial of R. Kelly*, Huey states, "Here's something Black people have known for a couple of hundred years. Ni**as are crazy. Now, Black people don't like to talk about crazy ni**as in front of White people, but I'm afraid the secret may be out." On the surface it may seem Huey is merely perpetuating a stereotype about African-Americans; however, under closer examination his comments also underline the idea that African-Americans may have a "secret knowledge" about themselves about which whites may be unaware. Once given the opportunity to reflect, one may see that his comment focuses on the idea that blacks behave differently in front of other blacks than they do in front of whites, and it may be harmful to ignore this fact. This comment, like many of the other things Huey says, is thought-provoking and provocative. And while Huey makes this comment, the soft, slow, and even-pacing of the piano cues the audience to consider his words as food for thought.

Furthermore, music can enhance a message as in the episode in which *The Boondocks* imagines America in 2006 with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. still alive. In the episode Dr. King awakens decades after falling into a coma. When he is released from the hospital, he is shocked to see the state of the black community. As Dr. King walks down the street for the first time in decades, he is approached by an African-American youth who yells, "Hey, that 'I Gotta Dream' s**t was off the chain ni**er!" (*The Return of the King*). As Dr. King absorbs life in the new millennium, he concludes that his people are lost. He sees that they are obsessed with materialism and mediocrity, and, therefore, he sets out to help them.

Dr. King and Huey organize the first "Black-revolutionary" political party and do so in a church. However, the first meeting of the black political party is not a success. There is confusion among the attendees who are not aware that

they are attending a political meeting; rather they believe they are attending a "party-party." The attendees treat the meeting as though it were a dance club and enjoy themselves with loud hip-hop dance music as though there were no tomorrow. As King and viewers witness the chaos, his words, though harsh, stimulate reflection. He states:

> Will you ignorant ni**ers please shut the hell up! Is this it? This is what I got all those ass whuppins for? I had a dream once. It was a dream that little Black boys and little Black girls would drink from the river of prosperity freed from the thirst of oppression. But low and behold some four decades later what have I found, but a bunch of trifling, shiftless, good for nothin' ni**ers. And I know some of you don't want to hear me say that word. It's the ugliest word in the English language but that's what I see now, ni**ers. (*The Return of the King*)

These are clearly extremely harsh and confrontational words as Dr. King forcefully and pointedly rejects certain behaviors existing within the black community. As he gives this monologue, the hip-hop music ends and soft organ music rises in the background, reminiscent of the days when Dr. King spoke from the pulpit. The music serves to encourage reflection on his words as it signals the shift away from the party atmosphere and makes them more somber and weighty. Thus, in *The Boondocks* music functions rhetorically in multiple ways: to encourage the audience to reject the vitriol of Uncle Ruckus and consider him a fool or to reflect on the insightful words of Huey or even to consider the harsh critique of Dr. King. In each case the music functions to move viewers beyond the initial rejection of the obvious, and humorous, satire and ridicule to a different place. We have identified that place as one marked by the possibility of a fresh perspective and a movement past the static state of racism in America.

Visuals

In this section we note the ways in which visual cues and the use of the anime art form generate humor and function rhetorically.[5] Anime enables the show to present race strategically to encourage particular audience reactions as the facial features of the characters are manipulated to imply qualities such as power, confidence, and intelligence as well as ineptitude, low intelligence, and ignorance.[6] The second way that anime helps encourage particular audience reactions is through visual exaggeration of the human figure. In anime facial features

traditionally associated with particular dispositions are manipulated to imply personal qualities. As described by Webb, anime is characterized by a "set of stylistic conventions that evolved in the postwar period. These include exaggerated physical features such as large eyes, big hair and elongated limbs" ("Manga by any other name is . . . ?"). We contend that *The Boondocks* uses visual exaggerations like these in order to form the audience's understanding of the different characters and what they say and signify.

The show also makes use of racial ambiguity and enhancement in its presentation. In this way the use of anime is well suited to the show because as an art form, while it tends to downplay physical racial features, nevertheless, it has traditionally been focused on identity. As Napier states: "Indeed, anime may be the perfect medium to capture what is perhaps the overriding issue of our day, the shifting nature of identity in a constantly changing society" (12). In *The Boondocks* we are given a wide range of visual cues that work to shape our understanding. For the purpose of this analysis, we will examine Huey Freeman and Uncle Ruckus in order to understand how visual appearance shapes our reaction to each character.

Huey is very light-skinned and has a narrow nose and thin mouth yet also an afro hairstyle and dark eyes. The decision to draw Huey as racially ambiguous may make it easier for both African-Americans and white Americans to receive and reflect on the issues of race dealt with in the show through his character. That is, if the "ethnic bleaching" of anime characters was necessary to facilitate their international popularity, perhaps something like the same goal is accomplished with Huey in *The Boondocks*. Using this convention of anime enables the show to bring a powerful message about racism and race relations to a broader audience than it might otherwise.

The visual characterization of the show's main characters and narrator also disrupts what Cornel West has labeled the "normative gaze," in the visualization of race in Western society. In his seminal essay, "A Genealogy of Modern Racism," West traces the reinstatement of Greek standards of beauty through the Western tradition resulting in its prominence in modern discourse. This standard included facial features, body features, and skin color. The result is that yet today, nonwhites in Western society generally and American society in particular are measured against "alienating ideals of beauty" (109). Visually, Huey disrupts these ideals with the hair, eyes, and voice of an African-American but other facial features that may either be characterized as Caucasian or racially ambiguous.

Huey also has enormous, piercing eyes. He virtually never smiles, and his eyes and eyebrows challenge the viewer. He is a model of thoughtfulness, intelligence, and sincerity when he speaks, and his eyes reflect his always-sincere demeanor. In similar fashion Huey's emotions, which are most often subdued

and held in check, are clearly expressed in his eyes. For example, in the episode, "Riley Wuz Here," Huey decides to conduct a social experiment. He states:

> We all know that the images we see can elicit strong emotional reactions, but I've always wondered if the images we see can do more than hurt us emotionally. Is it possible to watch something so bad that it might hurt you physically? In other words, can too much Black television kill you?

Huey decides to watch nothing but television programs that feature a majority of African-American performers for two weeks. As the episode progresses, Huey's mental and physical appearance slowly degenerate. We see that Huey's eyes lose their piercing gaze and become droopy with dark bags under them. His back becomes hunched, and he slouches and walks slowly around the house. Even more, Huey's mouth becomes slack and an expression of nausea seems to form on it. The visual message is clear. There is little value in black television, and those who consume it suffer tremendously. As Huey's body and mind physically reject the images of black entertainment, the audience is visually cued to reject black television as well. As soon as the two-week period is over, Huey changes the television to watch a nature show, and the dark bags under his eyes immediately vanish.

Ruckus, on the other hand, is drawn with very dark skin and his African-American appearance is exaggerated in other ways as well. His nose is wide-set, and he has enormous lips. His pants sag, his stomach hangs over his belt line, and his hair is unkempt and scraggly. His right eye appears to be fake, or to have no eyelid, and it is perpetually wide open. His left eye is more normal in appearance, but he rarely opens it more than a crack and it looks small. The contrast between his two eyes is striking, and visually it makes his character look ridiculous even before he opens his mouth. The audience is thus visually cued to reject the hateful sentiments expressed by Ruckus because we are encouraged to reject him as a fool.

One way to describe the visual presentation of Ruckus is as an example of the use of the grotesque. Ruckus embodies the grotesque, a device, like satire, that operates in the frame of rejection. Ruckus is grotesquely overweight with a hideous skin condition, oily hair, and mangled and missing teeth. He is far and away the ugliest character on the show and stands out for this. When he speaks, we see spit coming from his mouth, and sweat drops off his face when he gets excited. This happens with none of the other characters. Visually, the show encourages viewers not to take Uncle Ruckus seriously. Whereas a straight reading of his statements chastising African-Americans for laziness, lack of intelligence, and

inferiority in comparison to white Americans would be completely unacceptable from a "normal" and credible character, and certainly from a white character, they become acceptable and generate comedic acceptance through the visually grotesque Uncle Ruckus.

West articulates the development of a discursive structure in the West that "prohibited the intelligibility and legitimacy of the idea of black equality in beauty, culture, and intellectual capacity." Most pertinent for this essay, and in particular the manner in which race and racial features are exaggerated and enhanced in *The Boondocks,* is West's contention that standards of visual beauty and proportion, in terms of the human form, are founded upon and restricted to "classical aesthetic values of beauty" resulting in visual, as well as discursive, white supremacy (97). In this section we have examined two of the primary characters in the show, each of whom plays off of these same cultural ideals. In the case of Huey, he is visually presented as approximating elements of the Greek ideal while Uncle Ruckus is visually exaggerated far from these ideals. Yet neither one meets the corresponding discursive expectations associated with their visual appearance. Huey, at least to an extent, is visually white, while his thoughts, actions, and words are those of an ideologically enlightened black man reminiscent of his namesake, Huey Newton. Uncle Ruckus is visually exaggerated in his blackness yet speaks the most outrageously white supremacist ideas on the show.

Conclusion

As we have shown, *The Boondocks* makes use of the adult cartoon format to humorously critique the incongruities, hypocrisy, and struggles related to race in America. The primary target is selected aspects of African-American culture and the primary frame is one of satirical rejection. A forceful critique of white American culture and the contradictions of white supremacy and racism is also a regular part of the show. As the various incongruities are presented through the dialogue, the music, and in the visual features of the show, viewers are encouraged to both laugh and reflect.

The Boondocks is an edgy program in both content and form. The representation of race in the show is potentially quite problematic, particularly if the humor fails. While we would expect that nearly every viewer will find aspects or specific segments of the show offensive, we take the manner in which *The Boondocks* presents and critiques a range of perspectives and practices to be laudable. The show critiques black and white American social, political, and cultural perspectives and practices. And, as these perspectives and practices come in contact with one another, the clashes are rich and dynamic. This produces tremendous humor

and, as we have argued, it encourages productive reflection. The incongruities are many, but the potential for insight is great.

Notes

[1]We thank two extremely helpful *RR* reviewers, Richard Marback and Adela Licona. The quotation in the title comes from Glenda R. Carpio. *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery*. New York: Oxford UP, 15.

[2]As an example, Vidmar and Rokeach (1974) examined audience interpretations of the humor in *All in the Family*. They found that while some viewers laughed at the overt racism in the comments of Archie Bunker, others laughed at his hippie son-in-law Michael, who portrayed a racially enlightened person.

[3]McGruder has also published his comic strips in a series of books including *The Boondocks: Because I Know you Don't Read the Newspapers*, Kansas City: Andrews McMeel (2000); *A Right to Be Hostile: The Boondocks Treasury*, New York: Three Rivers P (2003); *Public Enemy #2: An All-New Boondocks Collection*, New York: Three Rivers P (2005); and *All the Rage: The Boondocks Past and Present*, New York: Three Rivers P (2007).

[4]Readers interested in the media portrayal of Huey Newton and the Black Panthers will find the following works helpful: Pearson, *Huey: Spirit of the Panther*; Hilliard, Zimmerman, and Zimmerman, *The Shadow of the Panther: Huey Newton and the Price of Black Power in America*; and Jeffries, *Huey P. Newton: The Radical Theorist*. The Party is seen to have continued the militant and nationalistic efforts of Malcolm X. Huey Newton, who earned a PhD in Social History from the University of California at Santa Cruz, also continued the intellectual legacy of Malcolm X. He was convicted of manslaughter in 1967, but this was overturned two years later. He and the Black Panther Party later adopted a nonviolent creed and focused on providing food, housing, and basic social services to black Americans in need. He later faced another charge for murder, but this did not result in a conviction. In 1989, after a conviction and short jail sentence for the misuse of public funds, he was murdered in Oakland, apparently participating in a drug deal that went bad.

[5]All quotations from episodes of *The Boondocks*, season one and season two.

[6]Anime is a uniquely Japanese visual art form that began in the early twentieth century. In the United States, the form became popular in the 1960s when a Japanese comic book, *Aru Machikado*, was made into a television show, *Astro Boy*. Other anime television shows followed in the midsixties including *Gigantor*, *Speed Racer*, and *Kimba the White Lion*. The art form often includes children as main characters and heroes. The form also presents human emotion in a very visual manner and highlights the role of emotion in human interaction: "In anime the feelings of the characters play an important role in shaping their actions, much more so than in most American products, live or animated" (Poitras 55).

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